Input in Language Learning and Teaching

ROM/GER/CHN 803
Fall 2014
First Point

Input is necessary to language acquisition (i.e., the development of an underlying mental representation)

• Let’s begin with a definition: “Input is…”

• Input is the language that learners are exposed to that is communicative in nature. That is, the learners are paying attention to the language for the message(s) it contains.
  • Input is always embedded in some kind of communicative act.
  • With input, the role of the learner is on the interpretative side of communication.
First Point

• So, why do we say input is necessary?

• Theoretical: Because the internal processors and architecture responsible for language can work only on one kind of data. Remember the bar code scanner analogy? Remember our earlier work on language and that there are no rules in the classic sense?

• Evidential: No advanced learner of a language has become advanced in the absence of copious amounts of input. Input is the common thread.
  • study abroad
  • marriage
  • work abroad
  • movies, music
Second Point

Learners filter input (input processing is constrained)

• Keep in mind that the speech stream has to be processed in real time. That means that learners have to juggle a lot at any given moment.

• How do learners filter input?
Second Point

• Learners are driven to try to understand what they hear. So, their focal attention is on content words and chunks of meaning.
  • Learners are adept at “filling in the gaps” when trying to make sense out of something.
  • Did you do your homework? → you, homework, ?
• Stuff at the beginning of utterances (and at the end) are the most salient.
  • Where did you study last night? → Where, last night/ (you) study

• We will see more and go into detail when we get to focus on form. We will see why “grammatical cues” are often left out in early and intermediate stage processing of input. (You will experience this first hand in a few minutes...)
Third Point

Not all input is created equal.

• Who is the following intended for?
  • Where’s your nose? Show me your ears. Show me your eyes. Now, where’s your mouth? Oooh, you’re so smart!

• Who is the following intended for?
  • In a related story, President Obama delivered an address in the Rose Garden today in which he once again affirmed that no ground troops would be involved in the war with ISIS.
Third Point

• Input to children is **modified**. This makes it good input for them.
  • Modified input is language that has been adjusted to (1) meet the comprehension level of a learner or (2) solve an immediate comprehension issue for the L2 learner.

• **Input to second language learners needs to be modified as well.** What makes for good input for L2 learners?
Third Point

• PAUSES.
• “This is Ray and he is typical student at MSU.”
• “This is Ray [pause] and he is [pause] a typical student [pause] at MSU.”
Third Point

- REPETITIONS, WHERE USEFUL AND NATURAL.
- “This is Ray and he is typical student at MSU.”
- “This is Ray and he is typical student at MSU. So, this is Ray. He is a student. He is a typical student. He is a student at MSU.”
Third Point

- SHORT SENTENCES.
- “This is Ray and he is typical student at MSU.”
- “This is Ray. He is a typical student. He is a student at MSU.”
Third Point
Fourth Point

Interaction, while not necessary, can be beneficial when it comes to the quality of input.

• What does interaction do to the input?
• It gets the other speaker to adjust language when the learner signals miscomprehension or lack of comprehension. We call this “input modification” (see previous slides). When a learner comprehends more, this increases (does not guarantee) opportunities for acquisition.
• It’s not clear that interaction helps all aspects of language:
  • lexicon
  • some pronunciation
Why Interaction...

• “This is Ray. He’s a typical student at MSU. Let’s look at Ray. What is this? Is it a newspaper or a book? Yes, it’s a newspaper. So, Ray has a newspaper. Ray reads the newspaper everyday. Do you read the newspaper everyday? Who reads the newspaper everyday? Does the typical student read the newspaper everyday? So, Ray is not typical?”
Why Interaction?

• Interaction also gets learners to pay closer attention to what is directed at them.
  • Talk at versus Talk with

• How does this play out in a classroom? Is it possible for teachers to adjust input when speaking in front of 20+ learners?

• Do you have to participate in the interaction to get something out of it?
Input and the Classroom

• If the class period is 50 minutes long, just how much input are the learners getting per day? What is the quality of that input?
  • Wing (1987): the nature of teacher talk
  • L1: 46%; L2: 54%
  • Linguistic talk: 26%; Communicative: 74%
  • Within communicative, 48% was in the L2
  • So, less than ½ of 74% of class time could be classified as something like “communicative input.” Calculate the minutes.
  • But what about the quality of that input?

• So, a major instructional job in the early phases is to move away from constant learner production to providing more and more input and interaction with that input.
Using Input to Introduce Vocabulary

• Why memorizing lists isn’t vocabulary acquisition.

• The lexicon is no different from other aspects of language. The mental lexicon must build up over time through constant exposure to the language.

• Unlike grammar, explicit learning of vocabulary might help the processing of vocabulary in the input.
Using Input to Introduce Vocabulary

• **Biggest pitfall:** worrying about teaching and testing the words and not content. That is, don’t teach and test vocabulary through input in the classroom. Use the vocabulary to teach something else or to arrive at another end. The vocabulary will come along with the content.

• Example: don’t teach family vocabulary. **Teach your family and make students responsible for knowing who your father is, who your mother is, who your sister is, etc., what their ages are.** Words for family will get “dragged” along with it.

• Example: don’t teach clothing. **Teach what’s in your closet.** Clothing will get dragged along with it.

• Example: don’t teach numbers. **Teach them how to play Fish or important campus phone numbers.**
OK. Let’s Try

• Let’s work on introducing the following via input:
  • family
  • colors
  • numbers
  • weather
  • clothing
Bottom Line

• The classroom is the premiere place for the beginner’s exposure to input.

• One of an instructor’s main jobs (not the only job) is to be a “good input provider.”
  • The bottom line is making oneself understood. You are part of a communicative act.

• In addition, what about out-of-class activities?
For Next Week

• Bring definitions for the following constructs:
  • input
  • modified input

• Two people will present new principles based on this module.

• Two people will present on the question on the next slide.
For Next Week

• #1: Video tape someone’s class. Count how many times that person says something in the L2. Then, determine the following:
  • how many instances (%) are questions you are asking the students to answer in order to show they know something? Example: What color is this?
  • how many instances (%) are questions asking students for actual content information? Example: What’s your favorite color?
  • how many instances (%) are statements that convey information about a topic or content? Example: My favorite color is red. But I like red as an accent color.
  • how many instances (%) are examples to illustrate a language point? Example: When red is an adjective it agrees with the noun. For example, A red book versus a red house.
  • What can we say about the quantity and quality of the input in the class?
For Next Week

• #2. Interview 3-4 language instructors who have not taken this class. Ask them the following questions:
  • Define input in language learning.
  • Tell me about the role of input in classroom language learning.
  • Do you think learners in classrooms engage different processes for learning language compared to learners who aren’t in classrooms?
  • Without guiding their thoughts, push them to explain what they mean each time to get honest but thorough responses. When reporting back to us, indicate to what extent these teachers seemed to be informed by principles of acquisition.
Taking Stock

• What are some of the best principles so far?

• **Module 1**
  - Language consists of an implicit mental representation that is both complex and abstract.

• **Module 2**
  - A definition of communication must inform the nature of communicative language teaching.
  - Communication is different from what we mean by “language.”

• **Module 3**
  - Language acquisition is constrained.
  - Language acquisition is dynamic but slow.
  - Language acquisition is a unique process/Language acquisition is modularized.